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Tips for Workers to Fight Germs, Illness - 09/29/2004

Are unclean and unsanitary workspaces making Americans sick?

A wide majority of the nation's workers think so, concludes new consumer research from a leading janitorial services provider. A survey by ServiceMaster Clean, "Office Cleanliness Monitor," uncovered an array of untidy office behaviors that – coupled with concerns about how effectively buildings are cleaned – contribute to employees' beliefs that such conditions lead to more sick days and lower productivity.

The Office Cleanliness Monitor surveyed 1,000 U.S. office workers and found that 64 percent of office workers see a connection between a clean building and the number of times an employee calls in sick, citing longer hours at work with no increase in cleaning as one of the prime culprits that ultimately lead to unsanitary conditions.

"The Office Cleanliness Monitor also found that employees might not be taking the proper steps to ward off germs."

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Americans logged an average of 1,785 hours in the workplace last year, and estimates indicate a staggering 415 million vacation days will go unused in 2004. The two statistics illustrate the on-the-job pressures that office workers are feeling in today's economy, which may be contributing to some surprising behavior.

The Monitor found, for instance, that 85 percent of U.S. workers eat in their office space, and more than one in three admits to clipping nails at work. Twenty-two percent say that they see a co-worker sneeze, cough or yawn nearly every day without covering their mouth. And, nearly one in two workers (45 percent) has seen co-workers leave the restroom without washing their hands. Thirty percent of workers

"sometimes" or "very often" retrieve things from the trashcans in their office.

"The job demands on America's workers aren't easing, and with so much of our time spent in the office, it's really no surprise that we and our co-workers behave in ways that spread germs," said Gary Bauer, ServiceMaster Clean's director of business services. "What may be surprising, though, is the extent to which workers notice that their buildings are not being cleaned as effectively and thoroughly as they believe is possible. If building management is cutting corners in this area, office workers are noticing, and they think it's contributing to less productivity and more absenteeism."

The Monitor research also found that:

- 85 percent of workers think regularly about the cleanliness of their office
- Only 40 percent of workers have "a lot of confidence" in their building's cleaning team
- 78 percent of workers say they get sick each year from co-workers
- The average number of times they catch a cold from co-workers is 1.4 times/year
- 69 percent believe a clean office makes employees more productive

And when it comes to cleanliness, men and women apparently see things a bit differently. For instance, men are less likely to do any of their own office cleaning (75 percent of men claim to straighten up their own office, versus 91 percent of women). But men are more likely to say they witness unsanitary behavior from their co-workers (52 percent of men report seeing co-workers leave the bathroom without washing their hands, compared to only 38 percent of women).

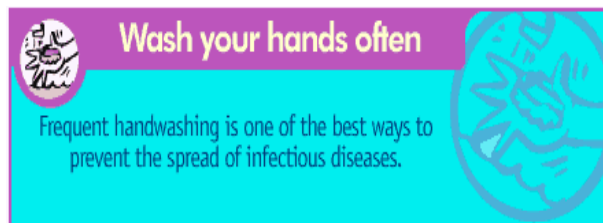
"Although 47 percent claim to be dusting with a cloth regularly, if they're not using a germ cleaner, they're just spreading the bacteria around."

The Office Cleanliness Monitor also found that employees may not be taking the proper steps to ward off germs. "Ironically, despite the findings of the Office Cleanliness Monitor, the best intentioned employees often are the ones spreading germs," explains Bauer. "Although 47 percent claim to be dusting with a cloth regularly, if they're not using a germ cleaner, they're just spreading the bacteria around. Fortunately, there are several simple steps that can make a workspace more sanitary and protect its owner from germs."

ServiceMaster Clean suggests the following tips for keeping your office or cubicle safe and healthy:

- Use "spill proof" drink containers

- Do not dispose of food in desk trash
- Wipe phones with antimicrobial wipes on a daily basis
- Wipe doorknobs and work surfaces with antimicrobial wipes during cold-and-flu season
- Remove items (clutter) that impede or hinder the ability of the janitorial crew to clean adequately
- Prevent germs from spreading (*e coli* can be picked up on shoes from a restroom visit, deposited on the desktop and enter the bloodstream with contact)
- Wash hands – and for as long as it takes to sing "Happy Birthday"
- Report dust buildup on air diffusers, a signal that the system is dirty and needs cleaning.



The most important thing that you can do to keep from getting sick is to wash your hands.

By frequently washing your hands you wash away germs that you have picked up from other people, or from contaminated surfaces, or from animals and animal waste.

What happens if you do not wash your hands frequently?

You pick up germs from other sources and then you infect yourself when you

- Touch your eyes
- Or your nose
- Or your mouth.

One of the most common ways people catch colds is by rubbing their nose or their eyes

after their hands have been contaminated with the cold virus.

You can also spread germs directly to others or onto surfaces that other people touch. And before you know it, everybody around you is getting sick.

The important thing to remember is that, in addition to colds, some pretty serious diseases - like hepatitis A, meningitis, and infectious diarrhea -- can easily be prevented if people make a habit of washing their hands.

When should you wash your hands?

You should wash your hands often. Probably more often than you do now because you can't see germs with the naked eye or smell them, so you do not really know where they are hiding.

It is especially important to wash your hands

- Before, during, and after you prepare food
- Before you eat, and after you use the bathroom
- After handling animals or animal waste
- When your hands are dirty, and
- More frequently when someone in your home is sick.

What is the correct way to wash your hands?

- First wet your hands and apply liquid or clean bar soap. Place the bar soap on a rack and allow it to drain.
- Next rub your hands vigorously together and scrub all surfaces.
- Continue for 10 - 15 seconds or about the length of a little tune. It is the soap combined with the scrubbing action that helps dislodge and remove germs.
- Rinse well and dry your hands.

It is estimated that one out of three people do not wash their hands after using the restroom. So these tips are also important when you are out in public.

Washing your hands regularly can certainly save a lot on medical bills. Because it costs less than a penny, you could say that this penny's worth of prevention can save you a \$50 visit to the doctor.

